

A MYSTERIOUS ISLAND

San Nicolas Was Once Peopled by a Race of Indians.

AN ENIGMA OF THE PACIFIC.

On This Barren, Wave Swept Sand Dune Are Mounds of Shells and Bones and Stone Implements, Monuments of a Lost Race of Ancient People.

About eighty miles due northwest of San Pedro, in California, lies a desert island that has all the combined romance of the ages in its history. It is rarely visited and has but a single inhabitant, yet it has a peculiar fascination for many people. The very elements seem to conspire to make the place forbidden, as it almost invariably blows a gale of wind in the vicinity, and when one reaches the inhospitable island there is no bay or harbor for a craft much larger than a rowboat.

The island is about seven miles long by two or three in width and rises to a height of 800 to 1,000 feet in the center. Wind swept, forbidding, haunted by the spirits of storms, it does not invite inspection and appears to have been cursed by the elements, yet despite this the island was at one time the home of a numerous people, a race that has been lost sight of. The writer made several attempts to reach the island in a sixty ton yacht and was literally blown off, finally making it one day about noon, coming to anchor near a long, specter-like tongue of land that extends out into the ocean, where the tide ran like a mill race and a heavy ground swell swept around the point from the windward side. The island of San Nicolas appears like a sand dune. The landing was a wave swept beach that received a high swell from three points, and it was evident that skill in landing alone would make it possible.

The boat lay off, waiting for a low sea, and finally went sailing in upon one of less size, and the crew jumped overboard and held on to the boat that the undertow and back rush attempted to claim. In this manner the entire party landed, and an investigation of the island was begun. The one inhabitant, a Basque, came down to the beach. He had not heard the news of the world for a year and did not display any disposition to learn it, but he was not happy—too many dead people, too many bones that make wind spirits blow, he said, and when he heard that the party was after the remains of these dead people he showed an inclination to leave. In all probability there is not in any land a more remarkable mound to be seen. About ten feet in height and nearly a mile in length, it was at this time a veritable Golgotha, a collection of bones and implements of the lost people, ever changing, ever shifting, today exposing numbers of skeletons, tomorrow covering them up in sheets of sand.

The mound was a town site upon which hundreds of people had lived for untold ages. They had brought up their shells and fish bones, piling them up at the doors of their huts, slowly building themselves up higher and higher, until in time they came to live on the top of a vast shell mound. Here they buried their dead, concealed their household goods, and when a man or woman died his or her possessions were buried with them, and so the big mounds were made up of shells, stone implements, fish and human bones—a monument of this lost race.

Where the original islanders came from, who they were or why they lived on such a wind swept, nearly waterless island is one of the mysteries, but it is known that the mission fathers visited San Nicolas years ago and took off the few survivors found there and divided them up among the various mainland tribes. When this human loot was being carried into execution, a storm came up, and in the hurry of departure it was found that a woman had left her baby on the beach.

It was impossible to land, so the captain sailed away, but not with the mother. She had plunged into the waves and swum a long distance to the shore and with her child was deserted, the captain intending to return later for her. San Nicolas, however, was not visited for many years. The vessel was wrecked, but the legend lived, and many years after a priest decided to visit the island and learn if the woman had survived. An expedition was got up in 1850, the party making a safe landing. They formed a line across the island in order not to miss any signs of human habitation and began a slow search from the south point north. They soon found evidence of ancient occupation and in a deep canyon discovered a hut and a woman, the mother who had been deserted years before. She was living in the hut, which was made of whale ribs and sea lion hair, her sole companions being several wild dogs that savagely charged the strangers.

The woman could not make herself understood, and, singularly enough, no one in all the Indian tribes in southern California could be found who understood her. She told her discoverers by signs that the wild dogs had killed her child long ago and that she killed sea lions and sea birds with stones and lived on them.

At first she appeared to be afraid of the men; but, finding that they treated her kindly, she consented to go with them. She took all the rude articles she had used during the years of her

solitude, her skin dresses, made mostly from the skins of the sea lions, and so interesting were the costumes that they were sent to Rome to the pope by the priest who instigated the rescue.

The woman was taken to Santa Barbara and named Maris, after the little vessel which accomplished her rescue. She was placed in care of a family, who did everything possible for her. She was bright and vivacious in disposition, learned some Spanish, danced and sang for her friends and was visited by Indians from various parts of California in an effort to find some one who could understand her. But civilization proved too much for her, and she died in three months, one of the most remarkable Crusoes known, as her story is based on actual facts and in its details is much stronger than fiction.

The interesting mound which the writer examined on San Nicolas was formed during past centuries by the ancestors of this woman and possesses an intense interest on this account. The island near the landing was twenty or thirty feet higher than the shore and reached through singular wind worn passes, wind being the sculptor here. Once on the heights a broad mesa was seen, as level as a floor and marked with lines which resembled ancient plowing or something of the kind. The mesa was covered with fine flinty stones about the size of peas, which the herder says were picked up by the wind and blown through the air at times. They were arranged like chaff on a beach. The writer followed this mesa for several miles, and that the island had had a large and vigorous population at some distant time was evident. Every short distance some object was found, now a pipe

made from the vertebrae of a fish, a needle of fish bone, a dish made from a shell, the holes plugged with asphaltum. Here would be a stone club or mortar of steallite, a spearhead or a sinker and shell hooks that some fisherman centuries ago perhaps had dropped and forgot.

Everywhere piles of big pearly shells of a size unknown here were found, telling of the lives and work of these people. One mound was found covered by the ribs of whales and beneath them a flat rock bearing marks of various kinds, and then the owner, a skeleton in perfect preservation, and all about it in the sand vessels of stone, flutes of bird bones and the various objects which went to make up the home of this unknown. In one spot six layers of skeletons were found, the lowest apparently very old. The question of age is always very interesting, but no one in contemplating these great shell deposits can form an adequate idea of their age.

The island evidently has been inhabited since the earliest times. But the elements have conspired against it, and it is doomed to be swept and covered with sand. The island is now frequented by the professional collectors, who go over from the mainland and live here for weeks and months, camping out on the sand dunes, weighting their tents down with rocks to prevent being blown into the sea. Every morning they go out, with their hooks and poles, hunting for the spools which have been uncovered by the wind in the night. In this way tons of material have been collected here and sent all over the world.—Chicago Chronicle.

On the whole, Congress in session is getting to be about equivalent to Roosevelt in action.

LISTEN

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